

A Broken Promise by paladinclericimage

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Summary: Sunday morning Mike wakes up to discover that his world has fallen from underneath him.

A Broken Promise

I'm not ok.

*My fingertips are scattered on the floor,
and I'm breathing coal.*

I don't see any blood, but I can feel myself bleeding.

The worst part is that

I am telling this to you.

-Anonymous

Chapter One

The Vanishing of Jane Ives

The kids were quiet on the ride home from the hospital. Ted hummed along to the music on the radio. Duran Duran, then Men at Work. If it weren't for the risk of argument, Karen would smash the dial to bits. How could Ted sit there as if they were driving home from a family film? They were on the way home from the hospital after an incredibly long night which included phone calls from the police, the resurrection of a dead child, and the murder of about fifty people. Those murders happened in front of Michael. And although Nancy wasn't talking, Karen knew she had seen terrible things, too. Their children were clearly traumatized, and Ted was oblivious.

How had it all unraveled so fast?

Ted paid the sitter while Karen followed the kids upstairs. Nancy ducked her questions and headed towards the bathroom for a shower, her palm mysteriously wrapped in blood soaked gauze. Mike went straight into his room and shut the door. In the hall, Karen listened. First the muffled hiss of water. Then her husband thanking the sitter for putting Holly to bed and seeing her out. Most jarringly, the sound of Mike losing himself to violent, choking sobs.

Should she go in? It was tricky now that they were growing up. At Holly's age kids loved to be held. Nancy refused to be held at all. Mike had let her hold him outside the middle school, when she found him sitting in the back of an ambulance. Would he let her repeat the gesture now that there was a closed door between them? Or was it a sure sign he wanted space?

She decided on space, although it hurt to hear him that way. What had caused this? The murders that took place in the school that night? Exactly how close had he been? Was it seeing Will, one of his best friends, weak and hooked up to oxygen? Was it the girl? In the morning she would let him—and Nancy, for that matter—sleep in and miss church. She would make blueberry pancakes, then gently ask him all these questions.

"Everything alright?" Ted reached the landing.

Karen hoped he wouldn't choose tonight to sleep upstairs. Selfishly she wanted the room to herself, especially on the off chance that Mike or Nancy would come in seeking her comfort. Ted couldn't provide what she could, although she wasn't exactly confident in her mothering skills at the moment. Regardless, after how he'd reacted to their children's hurt, he deserved to sleep on the recliner.

"No, everything's not alright. Listen. Michael's crying."

Ted paused long enough to hear their son grasping for steady breath. Apparently it wasn't concerning. "He'll be fine. You heard what the medic said, it's all over. The boy's back, the girl's gone. Hawkins Energy will have to rebuild its staff, though. That might take some time."

"Oh, who *cares* about Hawkins!" she snapped. "Our children went through something, Ted. Something so awful they won't even share it with me! I don't think Will's return or the girl's disappearance is going to help it."

She swiftly passed him and headed into the bedroom, shutting herself in the master bath. Of all the mysteries this week presented her with, the greatest had to be the girl. Missing children happened, as unfortunate as it was. It wasn't a surprise for government owned facilities to cover things up, either. But a little girl said to have put

her son in danger, killed government officials? And the she, what, just *fled the scene*?

They hadn't heard it from Mike. Karen rocked him back and forth while Ted spoke to the EMTs. An officer came over shortly after and brought them up to speed. Each detail he recounted caused Mike to sink a little further into her, the facts too much weight to bear.

According to the officer, the kids sought refuge in the school to protect the girl. When they were discovered, the girl—who Karen gleaned no understanding of—slaughtered as many men as she could. Then she ran. Police were scouring the floors of the building and the perimeter around the school looking for any sign of her. Nothing yet.

Karen doubted the story. The girl in the photo she had been shown earlier that day was young and meek. The idea that a child was capable of racking up a death toll seemed ridiculous. Besides, she trusted her son more than these Hawkins employees. If Mike, Dustin, and Lucas had been hiding this girl in the house all week, she couldn't be as menacing as the officials wanted her to think.

Instinct told her Mike *had* been hiding her. He was a friendly boy, protective and loyal to those he cared about. He must have been crying about the girl's departure, the way he had cried about Will just a few nights before. But what could have happened between them over the course of a week to warrant such a serious reaction to her leaving? Had they bonded that quickly, gone from strangers to close friends?

Before Karen went to bed she padded back down the hall and listened outside Mike's door. It was silent. Carefully she turned the knob and peered into his room. He was sprawled on top of the covers, fully dressed with his coat and shoes on. The heat of a recent cry flushed his pale skin. The Realistic radio was beside him.

Goodbye, Mike.

He woke sheen with sweat and cold. Every muscle ached. Torturous dreams caused him to sleep fitfully, yet he couldn't recall them. Only the sense that he had been with someone special to him. Someone

close. Intuitively he knew that he was responsible—he had failed to protect whoever it was. Where did that phantom sense of uselessness come from? What was the dream about?

Rolling over to face the bedside table, he saw the Supercom standing at attention with its antennae up. It felt like someone set his lungs on fire. He remembered what he had done.

He had lost her.

Grabbing the radio, he tumbled out of bed and sprinted down the steps. As he flew through the kitchen he caught a glimpse of Nancy and their mom, who had baby Holly on her hip. His mother hardly had time to ask how he was before he was gone.

The basement was empty. She hadn't come home, and the fort he carefully built her the first night she spent with them remained destroyed in a pile near the door. What if she had been here, seen the mess, and assumed she wasn't welcome anymore?

He rushed into the bathroom and got sick.

For the next hour and a half he lay on the couch in a fetal curl, staring at the Supercom and hoping El would contact him. At noon it finally buzzed. Mike shot up and snatched it off the floor. It was Lucas, asking why he hadn't been at church that morning. He fought the urge to throw it across the room. Unless it was about finding Eleven, he didn't want to talk. Defeated, he set the radio back down, only to pick it up again when Lucas shouted his name repeatedly.

"What do you want? Over."

"Jeez, Mike. Are you okay? Over."

"No, I'm not okay. How could any of us be okay after what happened? Over."

"What do you mean after what happened? The Bad Men are dead and Will is safe. That's all that matters. Over."

"You mean you're not worried about El? Over." Mike was in disbelief.

"Why would I be? She's dead. I'm grateful she sacrificed her life for us. Over."

A thundering in his chest made the next words hard to cough up. "She's not dead, Lucas. She's just... hurt, or hiding. Over."

"Wait, you don't *actually* think she survived that, do you? Her eyes turned red, she broke up and fell apart. Over."

"No, she's not dead. She's too powerful to be dead. She's probably stuck in the Upside Down, waiting for us." He forgot to say *over*.

"Has she tried to contact you? Over."

"No, but that doesn't mean she's not alive. Maybe she's hurt bad, or she's too exhausted to use her powers. Over."

"Or maybe she's dead. There was no gate last night, Mike. She didn't go through a portal into another world. She turned to ash. How are we gonna look for someone who doesn't even have a body? I'm telling you, she's dead."

"She's not dead!" Mike shouted. In the silence of the basement he surprised himself. He sat up. "Eleven's not dead, okay? She's strong, and brave, and she can do anything. Like kill a Demogorgon and live to talk about it. If she talked, I mean. Point is, she put herself in danger to help the party. We went after Will, and we should go after her. We're the only family she has. Over."

Lucas sighed. "Look, I get it. You love her, and miss her, and we owe her. We do! But can we talk about it later? Dustin and I are meeting at the hospital in an hour to see Will. Over."

He didn't want to go. Of course he was grateful to have Will back, but Will was okay now. El wasn't. Mike had failed to save her from the Bad Men and the monster. Worse, he had broken his promise that she would come home and have a normal life. Thinking about it made his chest hurt. Whatever energy he had should be spent figuring out how to find her. Once she was safe, they could all hang out together. Will would love Eleven, and she would feel comfortable around him. Their party would be complete once she was home.

If only he could feel her like she could feel Will and Barb.

He closed his eyes for a moment and tried. There were nothing but flashes of El screaming, crunching the monster's bones with her mind. His eyes snapped open. He needed to talk to someone who could help. Will knew what the Upside Down was like, but Mike would never bother him about it when his wounds were still so fresh. If he talked to Nancy or Jonathan they would tip off the adults. He couldn't risk that. Besides, how much could they really do? It had taken everyone—kids, teens, adults—to get Will back. Given how Eleven disappeared it would probably take twice the instinct, knowledge, and manpower. Mike needed to talk to someone who had all that. Someone who had all that *and* knew what the Upside Down was like.

"Hello?" Lucas asked loudly. "Mike, are you coming? Over."

"Do you remember what Will told us last night? About how his mom and Chief Hopper got him out of the Upside Down? Over."

"Yeah, what's that got to do with visiting Will? Over."

"It doesn't. But it might have everything to do with finding El. Over."

"So, does this mean you're coming or not? Over."

"No, I'm not coming. Tell Will I'm sorry and I'll see him as soon as I can, I just really have to talk to someone else right now. Over."

"About *what*? What's more important than seeing Will? Over."

"Keeping my promise. Over and out."

Flo called his office and said some boy was there to see him. First he thought of Jonathan, but then a little pipsqueak shouted, "Tell him it's important!"

"Oh, God. There's not three of them, are there?"

A knowing smile warmed Flo's voice. "No, it's just the one. I'll send him back now."

Seconds later, Mike rushed in spitting questions. Jim couldn't tell if he was mad, sad, or motivated—might be a combination of all three. Whatever the cause, the kid was desperate.

"Sit down," Jim told him. Instantly he obliged. "How are you feeling after last night?"

"Horrible. I'm worried about El. Lucas thinks she's dead, or if she's not that she's somewhere we can't reach her. He doesn't want to help me look."

Jim stared at the boy, who was perched on the edge of the seat. "You don't think she's dead?"

"No!" Mike scoffed. "Of course not, she's *El*. She's like, the toughest girl in the universe. Multiple universes, probably. I think she's in trouble or hurt, but she *has* to be alive."

Last night there wasn't any time to ask the boys about their experience. There were parents at the hospital and the boys were upset and exhausted. Now he was curious. He sat back in his chair and asked, "What exactly did you see?"

Passionately, Mike explained everything. How El had scrambled the brains of the "bad men", as he called them, and then the "Demogorgon" came and ate the grey-haired one who was trying to take the girl. So Brenner was gone, thank God. The kids ran and hid in the science classroom, but the monster found them anyway. The girl defeated the monster, or so they thought, but she disappeared with it.

"I mean they vanished into the air like ash," Mike finished with a frown. "Both of them."

"And she hasn't come back to your house, she hasn't tried to contact you on the radio or in the lights? Nothing weird like that?"

Mike shook his head. "That's why I think she's hurt, or too afraid to come home."

"Home. Huh."

"Yeah," Mike continued, completely missing Jim's interest in word choice. His mind was buzzing with its newest line of thought. "She always felt bad about stuff, you know? Like she did something wrong and thought we would get mad at her. I mean, sometimes we got mad, but it was never her fault. She always wanted to protect us, as much as we wanted to protect her. If there's something dangerous where she is, she's probably afraid to come home in case it follows her and hurts us. She already thinks she's responsible for the Demogorgon."

"Why would she be responsible for the Demogorgon?" Jim's eyebrows raised.

"I don't know." Mike shrugged.

He leaned forward, elbows on the desk. "You came to ask for my help in finding her."

"Well, yeah."

To lessen the blow, he adopted a hushed tone. "I can help you, but not until this all dies down. I left the hospital late last night, spent all morning at Hawkins Middle, and I'm about to head over to the Hawkins Energy Lab."

"Good! We can go into the Upside Down and bring her home!"

Will must have told his friends the story of how he and Joyce ventured into the alternate dimension together. He imagined the kid's recount: *Chief put this bag mask on my face and carried me, I was only half awake, and we had to squeeze through this squishy portal to get back. We ended up at that energy lab near Mirkwood!* Jim didn't want them even knowing that much. Boys like these were young and foolish enough to believe that danger wasn't actually a threat, just some sci-fi novel come to life. For Jim, it was a waking nightmare.

How could he get Mike to back off without leading on to what he knew? Jim was already privy to the whereabouts of the girl, though he hadn't pinpointed her location yet. That would take time and resources, both of which he didn't have enough of.

The kid was hurting, though; that much was clear from the pallor of his cheeks and the way his hair was matted to one side. He'd probably bawled his eyes out and slept like hell. Jim couldn't blame him. He understood what it felt like to lose someone you love. And kids, man, they felt everything with a much greater intensity than adults. Of course Mike was neck deep in love with Eleven. She was a pretty girl with superpowers who had saved him. He'd do anything to get her back.

Which was exactly why Jim had to stray him as far away from actually searching for her as possible. He had just brought one kid back from the dead, he wanted to make it to New Year's without resurrecting another. Even if it meant letting the girl go.

Eleven hadn't really *gone*, of course. Problem was Jim couldn't tell anyone, not even Joyce, what he knew or what he had done.

"It's not that easy, kid," he continued. "The town is buzzing with gossip and complaints of people seeing things, property being destroyed. We gotta put together a story explaining how your friend came back to life. It's not exactly the best time to hunt down a telekinetic twelve year old with no birth record."

"What do you mean no birth record?" Mike's face scrunched up. Damn the porcelain skin of children and their incessant need to pick up on everything you let slip.

He sighed heavily. "You cannot repeat this to *anyone*. Not Will, not your other two friends, and especially not Eleven if she comes back. There's a lot she doesn't know about herself because of how she grew up. Now, I'm going to respect you and tell you a little of what I know, because I get it. You miss her. You're anxious to make sure she's safe and here I am tellin you to wait. But I need you to respect me, and her, by not spreading a single word. Understand?"

Mike nodded. "Totally."

"Her real name is Jane. I visited her mother this week when we were figuring out what really goes on in the Hawkins lab. Thing is, her mother was a part of government-sanctioned experiments. She didn't know she was pregnant while they were doing the tests. When they

found out, they tricked her. They took Jane from her and raised her themselves. They figured out she was telepathic and telekinetic and trained her as a weapon. But I take it you already figured that part out."

"I mean, we knew she was telekinetic. She can read minds too?"

"So we think."

"That makes sense, actually." The kid's face brightened remembering her. "She knew who Will was without ever meeting him... She knew where he was. When Troy pushed me down and I cracked my chin, she knew someone had hurt me. And the day I jumped into the quarry, it was like she knew I was in trouble."

Jim's eyebrows raised. "You jumped into the quarry?"

"Yeah, but forget that. I want to hear more about El. The Bad Men, they raised her from when she was a baby?"

"From when she was a baby."

"They did experiments on her, too?"

Jim nodded.

"Were there other kids? Did she have friends?"

"From what I saw in Hawkins Lab, she was the only one."

"But she's Eleven, so there must be others. Do you think they're dead?"

"Haven't got a clue," he shrugged.

"So, she grew up alone, raised by the Bad Men." Mike mulled it over, brown eyes flickering over the surface of Jim's desk. Suddenly they snapped up. "Has she been in there this whole time? I mean, her whole life, being experimented on and taught how to use her powers like a weapon?"

"Yes. The night she escaped and ran into you boys was the first night

she had ever set foot outside."

In a snap, Mike's eyes lost their light and welled with tears. He bit his lower lip to hold them in. A stab of pain twisted Jim's gut. That government-sanctioned research wasn't only ruining the lives of its victims' immediate families. Secrets leaked, and rumors based on the truth spread. Anyone whose lives were touched by those stories, or by the victims themselves, were liable to be hurt. He regretted putting such a depraved truth into Mike's hands.

"She's just a girl, she doesn't deserve to live like that."

"No one does," Jim agreed.

"We have to go after her, Chief, we have to go after her *now!* We need to bring her home before it's too late and help her feel better and safe and happy. She can live with me, and my mom will love her, and Nancy can help her pick out clothes and I can teach her how to read and she'll go to school with me and—"

"Hey, hey, stop." He found himself standing up and rounding the desk, kneeling beside the boy's chair. "I told you, as soon as this blows over we'll start up a search and bring her back. She'll survive until then."

Tears leaked down Mike's pale freckled cheeks. "Surviving means barely making it through. I want her to be safe."

"She will be, Mike. She will be. I'm working as fast as I can to make that happen. I will come and find you when it's time for us to start looking. Until then I want you to hang on. If she contacts you, come and tell me right away. And don't do anything dangerous. Okay?"

"Okay." He sniffled.

Jim didn't believe him. The kid had jumped into the quarry, and mentioned it like it was nothing. He gave Mike's shoulder a squeeze and waited for him to calm down.

Then he walked him out.